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CENSORSHIP AND THE VALUES OF FICTION.

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GENERAL STATEMENTS ABOUT THE MORAL VALUE OF LITERATURE HAVE PROVED TO BE UNSUCCESSFUL IN DISSUADING POTENTIAL CENSORS. MORE EFFECTIVE ARE ARGUMENTS WHICH CONVINCE THE PERSON WHO ATTEMPTS TO CENSOR LITERATURE THAT HE IS VIOLATING HIS OWN SOCIAL, POLITICAL, OR MORAL STANDARDS. HOWEVER, THESE, ALSO, ARE FREQUENTLY TOO GENERAL TO BE CONVINCING. THEREFORE, THE TEACHER SHOULD BE PREPARED WITH REASONABLE AND ARTICULATE DEFENSES OF THE SPECIFIC WORKS HE PLANS TO TEACH, BASED UPON ANTICIPATED CRITICISMS BY POTENTIAL CENSORS. IN PREPARING DEFENSES, TEACHERS SHOULD LEAD POTENTIAL CENSORS TO (1) CONSIDER THE OBJECTIONABLE ELEMENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WORK, (2) REREAD THE BOOK CAREFULLY TO AVOID BEING MISLED BY FIRST IMPRESSIONS WHICH ARE MODIFIED BY SUSTAINED REFLECTION, AND (3) REALIZE THAT THE REAL MORAL CENTER OF A WORK CANNOT USUALLY BE IDENTIFIED WITH THE EXPRESSED VALUES OF ANY ONE CHARACTER. "CATCHER IN THE RYE" SERVES AS A READY EXAMPLE OF THE KIND OF BOOK FREQUENTLY UNDER ATTACK. IF THE TEACHER CAN BRIEFLY EXPLICATE THE BOOK, EMPHASIZING ITS MORAL CONTEXT AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF HOLDEN'S REACTION TO THE PROSTITUTE AND THE WORDS SCRAWLED ON THE STAIRWELL, THE POTENTIAL CENSOR NOT ONLY MAY BE DISSUADED FROM PURSUING HIS DESIRES, BUT ALSO MAY BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEXITIES OF LITERATURE ITSELF AND HOW THE "IMMORAL" BOOK MAY BE, IN FACT, MORAL BY THE CENSOR'S OWN STANDARDS. THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM "THE ENGLISH JOURNAL," MARCH 1964, AND IS ALSO AVAILABLE FROM THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH, 508 SOUTH SIXTH STREET, CHAMPAIGN, ILL. 61820, FOR $0.20. (DL)

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Censorship and the Values of Fiction

Wayne C. Booth

Attempts to censor literature, stemming from various motives, are a major threat to teachers of English. The Students' Right to Read, published recently by the NCTE, is a helpful manual for teachers who must deal with such attempts. Professor Booth's discussion is a brilliant supplement to that publication. Professor of English at the University of Chicago, Dr. Booth is author of the well-known The Rhetoric of Fiction (University of Chicago Press, 1961).

To the teacher, any attempt by outsiders to censor teaching materials is self-evidently wrong. To the censor, it is self-evident that a responsible society must supervise what is taught to its children. Little wonder, then, that attacks on "censorship," like defenses of "responsible supervision of materials," too often assume what they set out to prove: addressed to those who are already converted, they may be useful for enspiriting the troops, but far too often they do nothing to breach the enemy's line.

To convert any "enemy," we must show him not simply that respectability, or tradition, or the National Council of Teachers of English are against him but that he is wrong, wrong according to his own fundamental standards. To tell him that he is wrong according to *our* standards gets us nowhere, though it may be great fun; the problem is to find, somewhere among *his* standards, at least one that is violated by what he proposes to do.

In dealing with censors, as with other enemies, it may very well be that the enemy is in fact so far beyond reason that there is no possible point of contact. But if we assume, as I think we must, that at least some of the would-be censors are men of goodwill whose values, at certain points, coincide with ours, then we must work at the extremely difficult task of showing them that even according to their own values, the effort to censor is misguided.

The sources for such points of contact —and hence of real rather than merely self-comforting arguments—are many. Most censors want to preserve some form of society in which they can exercise their own freedom; we can argue, following Mill and many others, that the kind of society the censor *really* wants cannot be maintained if his kind of censorship prevails. Similarly, most censors respect and seek to further the "truth" as they see it, and some of them can be shaken by arguing, with Milton and others, that truth flourishes best when ideas can compete freely. Or again, many censors, irrational as they may seem to us, respect consistency and would like to think of themselves as reasonable; they can be shaken, sometimes, by showing the inevitable irration-

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alities and stupidities committed by any society that attempts to censor.

Every teacher in America today owes it to himself to have ready, either in his mind or in his files, a portfolio of these and other arguments against censorship, fleshed out, of course, with the details that alone can make them convincing. He can never know when the censors will move in his direction, nor can he know in advance which of his supply of arguments will be effective in a given crisis. But he can know that unless he has thought the issues through, he is likely, when the attack comes, to stand tongue-tied. Of course he may go under anyway, no matter how well-prepared his defense, if the censor will not listen to his reasons; one should have no illusions about the easy triumph of freedom or truth, in any market place, open or closed. But even if the censor wins, there should be some comfort in knowing that one has at least said what can be said for the free teacher, freely choosing his own materials.

Specific Defenses Necessary

Since many censorship drives begin with attacks on specific works, an important and often neglected section of one's "Freedom Portfolio" ought to deal with some such heading as "The Moral Quality of Individual Works." Though censorship cases are seldom fought without some appeal to general political and social arguments that apply to all cases, they would more often be won if, at the first threat of attack on any one work, the teacher had a battery of specific defenses ready for battle.

What is usually offered, in place of such specific arguments, is a standard collection of highly general claims, already known to the censor, about the moral value of literature. There is good reason why such claims do not convince. For one thing, some literature is *not* moral, and there is even much good—that is, clever—literature which is quite obviously at odds with any moral values the censor can be expected to care about. For another, most literature, even of the most obviously moral kind, is potentially harmful to *somebody*, as Thomas Hardy pointed out in defense of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The censors are thus always on safe ground, from their own point of view, so long as we talk about all literature, or even all "good" literature. Even the most ridiculous attacks—say those on *Robin Hood*—have this much validity: it is *conceivable* that such a work might alter a child's beliefs, and if we admit this, we must also admit that the alteration might be "for the worse," according to the censor's values. The child who reads *Robin Hood* might decide to rob from the rich and give to the poor, or he might even decide to support a progressive income tax. We do no service to our cause if we pretend, as some have done, that literature cannot have such effects because it does not deal with beliefs. Any literary work that we really read will play upon our basic beliefs, and even though fundamental changes of belief produced by novels may be rarer among mature readers than among novices, it would be foolish to pretend that they do not occur. If the change is "for the worse," from the censor's point of view, then the work has done harm, and it should be banned.

In contrast to our general claims, the censor usually has some specific danger in mind which is directly and literally related to something he has seen in the text. He has found profanity or obscenity or depravity, and we tell him that the book will, like all "good books," do the students good. In Austin, Texas, a pastor who was testifying in a hearing against *Andersonville* read aloud a long sequence of cuss words, excerpted from widely separated bits of the novel. The committee was quite properly horrified. The book they "read" was a bad book by any criterion, and certainly it would be

a bad book to teach. But the horrifying fact about the episode[1] is not that the committee members were offended by what they had heard but that none of them had enough gumption to read so much as a single page of the real book straight through. It would do no good to say to such committeemen, when the preacher was finished, that *Andersonville* is really a highly moral work; the "book" which they experienced was not. Similarly it does no good to say to the censor of *The Catcher in the Rye* that it is really "calling for a good world in which people can *connect*—a key word in twentieth-century writing."[2] One can picture the reactions of the irate parent who has discovered the obscenities in *Catcher* as he reads the following defense of the morality of fiction-in-general:

> When the student learns to see great books, classic or contemporary, as metaphors for the whole of human experience, the study of literature contributes in a unique way to this understanding of these traditions. They help him to discover who he is and where he is going.
>
> An abstraction may have little emotional impact. But the dramatization of an abstraction, of concepts and values, offers us something we can grasp. We begin to feel and understand the abstraction.[3]

Now here is something for the parent really to worry about: if *Catcher* is on his mind, he will think that we teachers are treating its profanity and obscenity as standing for "the whole of human experience," suitable to help his child "to understand who he is and where he is going"! It is surely no comfort to tell him that literature, by dramatizing the experience of profanity and obscenity, makes it have more emotional impact.

The obscene phrase that Holden tries to erase from the school walls toward the end of *Catcher* is concrete, literal, visible; our "defenses of poesie" tend to be abstract, metaphoric, intangible. We must somehow make them seem to the censor as real as the abuses he has found, but to do so will never be easy. To be concrete and specific about the moral values even of a short poem is terribly difficult, and the precise inferences through which a good reader constructs his reading of a complete novel are so complex that it is no wonder we draw back from the effort to describe them. Yet it is only by learning to follow such processes for himself —that is, by learning how to read—that the censor can discover what we really mean by the morality or immorality of a work. Unless those who wield educational power know at first hand what we mean when we say that a literary work can be moral even though many of its elements are to them objectionable, the other defenses against censorship may finally fail.

I have a frequently recurring fantasy in which I am called before a censorship committee and asked to justify my teaching of such-and-such a book. As hero of my own dream, I see myself starting on page one of whatever book is attacked and reading aloud, with commentary and discussion, page by page, day by day, until the censors either lynch me or confess to a conversion.

A pipedream, clearly. And the one I use for substitute is not much less fantastic. An irate committeeman comes to me (I am a very young instructor in a highly vulnerable school district), and he threatens to have me fired for teaching *The Catcher in the Rye* (or *Huckleberry Finn*, or *Catch-22*—one can of course mold one's daydreams to suit current

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[1] As reported in *The Censors and the Schools*, by Jack Nelson and Gene Roberts, Jr. (Boston, 1963), pp. 136-37.

[2] This phrasing was in an early draft of the excellent NCTE pamphlet, *The Students' Right to Read* (1962). Every teacher should own and use this pamphlet, but it does not, even in the revised form, show the censor why we misguided teachers are so thoroughly convinced that immoral books are moral books.

[3] *The Students' Right to Read*, p. 11.

events). I look him boldly in the eye and I ask him one question: "Will you, before you fire me, do me one last favor? Will you read carefully a little statement I have made about the teaching of this book, and then reread the book?" And since it is fantasy, he says, "Well, I don't see why not. I want to be reasonable." And away he goes, bearing my neatly-typed manuscript and my marked copy of *Catcher*. Some hours later he comes back, offers his humble apologies for what he calls his "foolish mistake," and returns my manuscript. Here it is.

WHAT TO DO WITH A LITERARY WORK BEFORE DECIDING TO CENSOR IT

Let us begin by assuming that we ought to censor all books that we think are immoral. Learned men have offered many arguments against this assumption (you might want to take a look at Milton's *Areopagitica*, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, or the NCTE pamphlet, *The Students' Right to Read*, a copy of which I can lend you), but other learned and wise men, like Plato and Tolstoy, have accepted it, and we can do the same—at least for a time. What should determine whether a book is among those we want to censor?

The question will not arise, of course, unless you have found, as in *Catcher*, something objectionable. There you have found such things as teenagers speaking profanities, the phrase "Fuck you"— repeated!—and a schoolboy visit to a prostitute. It must seem to you that I am being merely perverse when I say that such a book is really highly moral, when "read properly." Yet I mean something quite real and concrete by this claim. Unfortunately, to see fully what I mean you would need to sit in my classroom every day, throughout the time we spend trying to learn how to read *Catcher* "properly." I know that you cannot spend the time that would be required for this experience, and the principal probably wouldn't allow it even if you could. But there are certain things you can do, on your own, to discover what a "proper reading" of this book might be.

The big job is to relate the seemingly offensive passages to the context provided by the whole work. To say this is not, as you might think, merely a trick to sidestep the true issues. We all relate literary parts to their contexts all the time, almost without thinking about it. If someone told us that a book talked openly about nakedness, we might, if we are worried by pornography, begin to worry. But we are not troubled to read "I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me." The context has transformed both the word "naked" and the concept of nakedness to obviously moral uses. Similarly, when we read about the woman "taken in adultery," caught "in the very act," we do not ask that the reading be changed to something less specific. Not only do we take for granted the piety of the Bible—something we do not and cannot do for *Catcher*—but the immediate context in John viii quite evidently requires a forceful statement of the nature of the sin that is being forgiven. If you doubt this, try substituting some lesser sin—say gossiping—for adultery in the passage, or some euphemism like "caught flirting with another woman's husband."

When we read the many other specific accounts of sexual abuses that the Bible contains—of seduction, incest, sodomy, rape, and what not—we do not put the Bible on the list of banned books, because we know that the context requires an honest treatment of man's vices, and that it at the same time changes the very effect of naming them. Though we might question the wisdom of teaching particular sections of the Bible to children

of a particular age, we would never think of firing a teacher simply for "teaching the Bible." We would want at the very least to know what the teacher was doing with it. We know the context, in this case, and consequently we know there is at least one book with many bad things in it that is still a good book.

It is exactly this same claim that we teachers want to make about a book like *Catcher in the Rye* (though few of us would want to go as far as one theologian who has called it a piece of "modern scripture"). But since the claim is much harder to substantiate with a long work like a novel, I want to begin with a look at how the process of transformation works in a short simple poem. Any poem with possibly offensive elements would do, but I have chosen a highly secular one that is likely to offend in several ways: "ugUDuh," by E. E. Cummings.

ygUDuh
ydoan
yunnuhstan
ydoan o
yunnuhstan
yguduh ged
yunnuhstan dem doidee
yguduh ged riduh
ydoan o nudn
LISN bud LISN
dem
gud
am
lidl yelluh bas
tuds weer goin
duhSIVILEYEzum

This poem may very well seem unintelligible to you on first reading. I've seen a class of high school seniors flounder with it—until I asked one of them to read it aloud. But then they worked out something like the following "translation" (though there was usually some unresolved debate about whether it is spoken by one speaker or two):

You've got to
You don't
Do you understand?
You don't know
Do you understand those
You've got to get
Do you understand? Those dirty
You've got to get rid of
You don't know anything
LISTEN, Bud, LISTEN
Those
God
damn
little yellow bas-
tards, we're going
To CIVILIZE them.

Now that the poem is out in the open, as it were (though limping badly), it obviously offers several possible kinds of offense. We can imagine, first of all, a National Association for the Advancement of Yellow Peoples rising in protest against the offending phrase *yellow bastards*, just as the NAACP of Brooklyn had *Huckleberry Finn* banned because it refers to Jim constantly as Nigger Jim. What right has a poet to use such language, degrading a whole people? Even though the poem was obviously written in wartime, when tempers ran high, that is no excuse for descending to such abuse.

"The context of the whole poem" provides an answer to this imaginary protest. Does Cummings, the poet, call the Japanese "yellow bastards"? Obviously not. There is a speaker, dramatized for our literary observation, a speaker whose tongue bewrayeth him, with every half-word that speweth out of his mouth. It is this speaker from whom the whole content of our paraphrase comes: he it is who would take those yellow bastards and civilize them. What *Cummings* says, of course, is provided only by inference from the way in which the statement is conveyed. The speaker provides, in the many signs of his brutish inarticulateness, evidence that Cummings is as greatly opposed to his foolish

bigotry as the president of the NAAYP might be. And of course, the poet expects us to take pleasure in the comic contrast between the speaker's lack of civilization and his bold program.

If the members of the NAAYP still feel dissatisfied with our effort to place the line in its dramatic context, claiming that they simply would prefer not to see such language in print, we can only ask, "Would you prefer that bigots who hate your group be portrayed more politely, hence more favorably, and hence more deceptively?" It is clear that as the poem stands, the more crudely the bigot is portrayed the stronger the indictment. Is it not likely that a student subjected to this poem in a literature course would come out of his experience *more* sensitive to the issue of bigotry, and *less* willing to accept the crudities of bigots than before?

Other readers, as we have learned in various censorship hearings, will object to the profanity. But again we see that the "poem" is no more profane than it is bigoted; it is the speaker who is profane. The purist may still say that he does not want profanity presented even as part of an indictment, but I have not noticed that censorship hearings have been marked by the censors' reluctance to speak the words they object to.

Steps for the Good Censor

Though the steps we have taken so far with this poem by no means exhaust what the good teacher would want to bring out in discussing it, they show very well what the good censor will want to do before carrying out his job.

(1) He will refuse to draw any conclusions whatever from any element of a work taken out of its context. This means that he will read the whole work.

(2) He will not be satisfied with one reading. When a work is assigned and discussed in class, it receives several "readings," sometimes quite literally and always in the sense that first impressions are modified by sustained reflection. As a class progresses, a poem, play, or novel is traversed by the alert student again and again. What the censor should be interested in is what the student will get after such reflective rereading, not the errors he might fall into if he read the work without the teacher's encouragement to thoughtful rereading. But of course this means that the censor himself must go through the same process. Any censor who rejected "ug U Duh" on one reading would be a very foolish censor indeed.

(3) The true values of a work—the real moral center which we may or may not want to rule out of our children's experience—cannot usually be identified with the expressed values of any one character. What we might call the *author's* values, the *norms* according to which he *places* his characters' values, are always more complex than those of any one of the characters he invents. To censor the Bible because Satan plays a prominent and sometimes even dominant and persuasive role would be absurd. It is equally absurd to censor any book for expressed values which are, for the proper reader, repudiated by the author's implied criticism.

If these three points apply to a short minor poem like "ug U Duh" they are even more applicable to the more complex reading tasks presented by long fiction.

The degree of difficulty varies, of course, depending on the reader and the work. It is easy for most readers to recognize, for example, that Mark Twain does not himself use the word "nigger" in *Huckleberry Finn*. "We blowed out a cylinder-head," says Huck. "Good gracious!" says Aunt Sally. "Anybody hurt?" "No'm. Killed a nigger." The whole point of this episode, coming as it does long after Huck has been forced by experience to recognize the nobility of "nigger Jim," is that even Huck cannot

resist thinking as he has been taught to think. Huck here not only uses the word nigger, but reduces "niggers" to less than human standing.* But it is not hard—at least for a white man—to see that Mark Twain is far from making the same mistake; indeed, he would have no point in relating the episode except to show a lapse from his own values.

A Negro reader is given a more difficult task. To place the offensive word or concept into its transforming context requires a kind of dispassionate attentiveness that his own involvement with words like "nigger" may easily destroy. The word sets off responses which, though appropriate to most occasions when it is used, are totally inappropriate to the very special use that Mark Twain has made of it. It is likely that every reader sooner or later encounters books that he misreads in exactly this way. And it is highly unlikely that we will ever discover our own errors of this kind, because the very nature of our fault, with its strong emotional charge, keeps us from listening to those who might set us straight.

The Catcher as Example

With all of this as background, suppose we turn now to your objections to *The Catcher in the Rye*. You said that you objected to the printing of the obscene phrase that Holden tries to erase. But in the light of your objections to the book, it is surely strange to find that you and Holden have the same feelings about this phrase: you would both like to get rid of it.

> It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they'd wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them—all cockeyed, naturally—what it meant, and how they'd all *think* about it and maybe even *worry* about it for a couple of days. I kept wanting to kill whoever'd written it.

Holden could hardly be more strongly opposed to the phrase; it is significant, surely, that throughout the scene from which this passage is taken, the tone is entirely serious—there is none of the clowning that marks Holden's behavior in many other passages. But this immediate context cannot in itself be decisive; though it is unequivocal about Holden's serious repudiation of the phrase which *you* repudiate, the *author* after all does print the phrase and not some euphemism, and this surely suggests that he is not so seriously offended by the phrase, in itself, as you and Holden are.

Clearly we are driven to thinking about what kind of character the author has created for us, in his lost wild boy. What kind of person is it who, a moment later, concludes that his effort to wipe out the obscenities of the world is "hopeless, anyway," because they are unlimited.

You said this afternoon that you found him to be a terrible person. But supposing we begin from the other direction and ask ourselves why young readers find him, as they do (I have yet to find an exception), so entirely sympathetic. When I ask my adolescent students why they like Holden so much, they usually say, "Because he is so real" or "Because he is so honest." But it takes no very deep reading to find many additional virtues that win them to him, virtues that even you and I must admire. It is true that his honest, or rather his generally unsuccessful but valiant attempt at honesty, is striking. But a far stronger magnet for the reader's affections is his

*A possible alternative reading would see Huck as himself master of the ironies here. Since he is author of his own anecdote, he may be thought of as choosing a moral language which he knows will be convincing to his auditor. Regardless of how we read the passage, Mark Twain is clearly guiltless, even from the most passionately pro-Negro viewpoint.

tremendous capacity for love, expressed in deeds that would do credit to a saint. The book opens, for example, with his visit, extremely distasteful to him, to the sick and aging history teacher. Holden knows that the old man loves him and needs him, just as he needs the love of the old man; it is out of real feeling that he subjects himself to the sights and smells of age and illness. The moral sensitivity revealed in this scene is maintained through the book. Again and again Holden reveals himself—often in direct contradiction of his own claims—to be far more sensitive than most of us to the feelings of others. He "feels sorry" for all the outsiders, and he hates the big shots who, like the Headmaster, allot their attentions according to social importance and try to shut out those who are fat, pimply, poor, or corny. He has genuine affection even for the Ackleys and Stradlaters ("I sort of *miss* everybody I told about"), and he is extraordinarily generous, not only with his possessions (almost everything he owns is on loan to some other boy) but with himself (he is the only boy who thinks of including the impossible Ackley in the trip to the movies). Though he often hurts others, he never does so intentionally ("I was sorry as hell I'd kidded her. Some people you shouldn't kid, even if they deserve it.") His heroes are those who are able to love unselfishly—Christ, Mr. Antolini, his sister—or those who, like James Castle, show moral courage. His enemies are those who deliberately inflict pain—for example, the boys who drive Castle to suicide.

A full catalog of his virtues and good works would be unfair to the book, because it would suggest a solemn kind of sermonizing very different from the special *Catcher* brand of affectionate comedy. But it is important to us in talking about possible censorship of the book to see its seeming immoralities in the context of Holden's deep morality.

The virtue most pertinent to the obscene phrase is of course Holden's struggle for purity. The soiled realities of the "phony" world that surrounds him in his school and in the city are constantly contrasted in his mind with the possible ideal world that has not been plastered with obscenities. His worrying about what Stradlater has done to Jane, his fight with Stradlater, his inability to carry through with the prostitute because he "feels sorry" for her, his lecture to himself about the crudities he watches through the hotel windows, his effort to explain to Luce that promiscuity destroys love—these are all, like his effort to erase the obscenity, part of his struggle to find "a place that's nice and peaceful," a world that is "nice and white." Though he himself soils, with his fevered imagination, the pure gesture of Antolini, revealing how helplessly embedded he is in another kind of world altogether, his ideal remains something like the world of the nuns, or the world of a Christ who will not condemn even Judas to eternal damnation. He is troubled, you will remember, when one of the nuns talks about *Romeo and Juliet*, because that play "gets pretty sexy in some parts, and she was a nun and all." Nuns ought to live in the pure, sexless, sinless, trouble-free world of his ideal, just as his sister ought to live in a world unsullied by nasty scrawlings on stairway walls.

All of this—the deep Christian charity and the search for an ideal purity—is symbolized in his own mind by the desire to be a catcher in the rye. He wants to save little children from falling, even though he himself, as he comes to realize, is a child who needs to be saved. The effort to erase the words is thus an ultimate, desperate manifestation of his central motive. Though it is a futile gesture, since the world will never in this respect or any other conform fully to Holden's ideal of purity, it is produced by the very qualities in his character which make it possible for him to accept

his sister's love at the end, give up his mad scheme of going west, and allow himself to be saved by love. It is clear that he is, for his sister, what she has become for him: a kind of catcher in the rye. Though he cannot protect her from knowledge of the world, though he cannot, as he would like, put her under a glass museum case and save her from the ravages of the sordid, time-bound world, he can at least offer her the love that comes naturally to him. He does so and he is saved. Which is of course why he is ecstatically happy at the end.

Now none of this is buried very deep in the novel. I've not had to probe any mystical world of symbols or literary trickery to find it out; it is all evident in the actions and words of Holden himself, and it is grasped intuitively, I have found, by most teen-age readers. Their misreadings are caused, in fact, by carrying this line too far: they often overlook Holden's deficiencies. So strong is the persuasive power of his obvious virtues (obvious to them) that they overlook his limitations of understanding and his destructive weaknesses: they take him at his word. They tend to overlook the strong and unanswerable criticism offered by his sister ("You don't like *any*thing that's happening") and by Antolini, who tries to teach him how to grow up ("The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one"). They also overlook the author's many subtle contrasts between what Holden says and what he does. In learning to read these and other built-in criticisms, students can learn to criticize their own immaturities. They learn that such a book has been read only when they have seen Holden's almost saint-like capacity for love and compassion in the light of his urge to destroy the world, and even himself, because it cannot live up to his dreams.

I am aware that what I have said does not "prove" that *Catcher* is harmless. I'm sure there are some young people who might be harmed by it, just as reading the Bible has been known to work great harm on young idealists give to fanaticism. I have not even "proved" that the book can be beneficial. Only your own reading can convince you of that; again I find myself wishing that you could reread the work with us, in class. But perhaps you will return to it now and try once more, moving from page 1 to page 277, thinking about Holden's moral life as you go.

I know I do not have to ask you (the dream continues) for your decision. As a man of honor, you can only have carried out our little experiment to the letter, and the book is now cleared of all suspicion. I should not be surprised if your experience has also made you wonder about other books you have suspected in the past.

You may have guessed by now that I have been inching my way all this while toward a repudiation of our original assumption. Is there really a place for *any* censorship other than the teacher's careful choice? The skill required to decide whether a work is suited for a particular teaching moment is so great that only the gifted teacher, with his knowledge of how his teaching aims relate to materials chosen for students at a given stage of development, can be trusted to exercise it.

Such a teacher can be trusted even when he chooses to teach works that reveal themselves, under the closest reading, to be immoral to the core. Let us suppose that you have performed the kind of reading I have described on a given work, say *Peyton Place* or one of Mickey Spillane's thrillers, and you find that it does not, as with *Catcher*, have any defense to offer for itself: it is immoral no matter how one looks at it. So you go to the teacher to insist that the book be removed from the reading list. You should not be surprised if the teacher replies: "Oh, yes, I quite agree with

you. *Peyton Place* is inherently an immoral work; there are, in fact, far worse things in it than the few sexual offenses you object to. Read carelessly by high school students, it could do tremendous harm—like other books of the same kind. That's why I insist on spending some time, in my advanced sections, on this particular kind of shoddiness. I find that most of my students have read the juicier sections on their own, anyway. By placing those pornographic bits back into the shoddy context from which they have been torn, the student soon comes to treat Metalious' commercial sensationalism with the contempt it deserves."

So you see, sir (the drama has by now shifted, dream-like from manuscript to real-life drama, and I am hearty, confident, even slightly patronizing as I fling one arm across his shoulder), the only person who can conduct the fight for good literature is the person who has some chance of knowing what he is doing: the sensitive, experienced teacher. He it is who. . . .

Dreams of wish fulfillment always end with a rude awakening. My dream ends with the admission that even with the best of luck my argument about *Catcher* would do no more than shake a censor's confidence in his own judgment. Wide awake, I know that many censors will only scoff at any efforts we may make to reason about the issues of censorship. But as I write these final lines, in South Africa, in August 1963, I do not doubt for a moment that even an ineffectual defense of freedom is better than no defense at all.

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